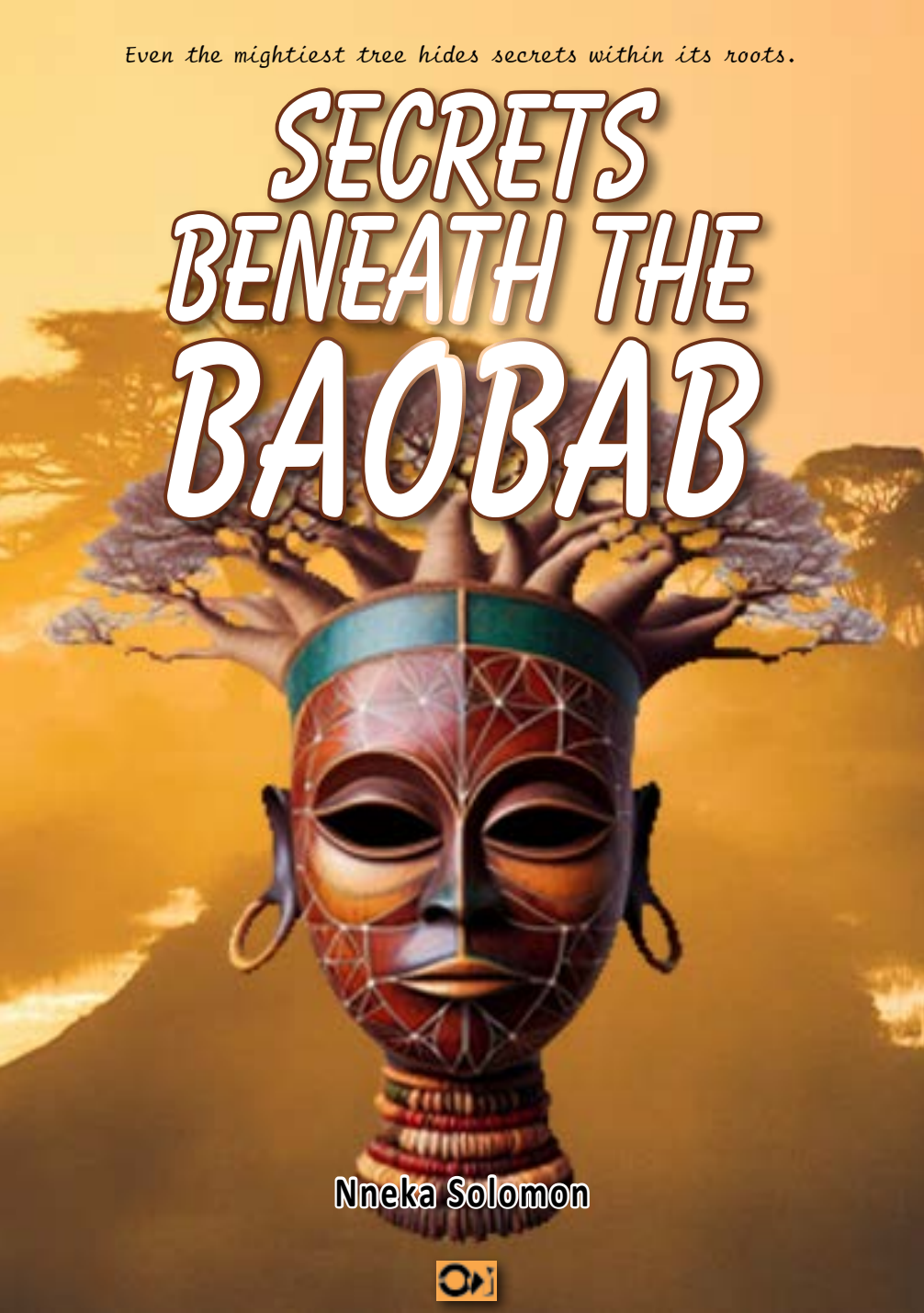
Even the mightiest tree hides secrets within its roots.

SECRETS BENEATH THE BAOBAB



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Nneka Solomon

Secrets Beneath the Baobab

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The sun hung heavy in the sky over Thondwe, casting long shadows between the scattered huts of the village. The dirt roads, winding like an ancient serpent, carried the dust of generations past. The air was thick with the scent of earth and the distant sound of children's laughter. It was a village that seemed unbroken, unchanging. And yet, within its veins, a current of tension flowed unnoticed by most, only felt in the fleeting glances and hushed voices carried by the wind.

Kamuzu, the village chief, was a figure of respect, his name whispered with reverence. A man of tall stature, his voice deep as the rivers that cut through the land, he ruled with the wisdom of ages. The people loved him, for he was fair, patient, a man whose decisions were like the heavy rains of the wet season ...necessary, inevitable. But even the mightiest tree

hides secrets within its roots. Beneath his stoic face, a tempest churned, one he did not yet know was rising.

At the village well, the women gathered as they always did drawn together by the rhythm of daily life, their laughter and voices carrying over the sound of water splashing into metal containers. The air buzzed with the familiar, the routine, the harmless gossip that made up the thread of their lives. Mphatso, the sharp-tongued one, spoke first, her eyes darting to the distant shade of the great baobab tree.

"Did you see it today?" Mphatso's voice dropped low, just enough to let the others lean in. "I saw them again, Doreen and Chisomo. They were under the baobab, close, too close." Her words hung in the air like smoke, curling, suffocating.

"Under the baobab?" Martha echoed, her hands frozen mid-air as she lifted her bucket. She was always eager to stir things up, her smile hiding the bitterness of envy. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean..." Mphatso hesitated, a smile playing at her lips, "...they were laughing. But it was different, you know? Not the kind of laugh a wife shares with her husband. No. A secret laugh. A laugh shared between lovers."

The other women exchanged uneasy glances, some wary, others intrigued, but all listening intently.

Busi, who had been silent until now, spoke up with a nervous laugh. "Mphatso, you're imagining things. They're just friends, surely. Chisomo has been here for years."

Mphatso shook her head, the flicker of certainty in her eyes unmistakable. "I'm telling you, it's not friendship. There's something...there's something more."

Her words stirred the wind, carrying them through the village like an invisible tide. Within moments, the gossip had travelled faster than a swift river, weaving through the market, creeping past the elders' compound, and taking root in the corners of every home. Everyone who heard it added their own interpretation some with a knowing smirk, others with disbelief, but the truth began to take shape, dark and thick, like a storm cloud.

Doreen, the chief's wife, had always been a quiet woman, moving through the village with the grace of someone who knew the weight of her position. She was a beauty, her skin smooth as the sun-kissed earth, her eyes full of an ancient sorrow that only

those closest to her understood. Her smile had always been warm, her voice gentle. But now, when she walked among them, the women watched her as one watches a bird that may fly away.

And then there was Chisomo. The local merchant. His smooth hands and charming words had earned him a reputation as a man who could barter anything, from salt to secrets. His wares, bright fabrics, fragrant spices, told stories of distant lands. He was always on the move, his laughter like the tinkling of a bell, his eyes always searching, always calculating. He never stayed too long, yet wherever he went, the scent of intrigue followed.

It was beneath the baobab tree, the oldest and most revered tree in the village, that they had been seen. The tree was sacred, a place where elders gathered, where children played, where the wind whispered through its gnarled branches. And now, it had become the stage for a quiet drama that would change the village forever.

That evening, as the sun dipped low, casting a golden light over the village, Kamuzu returned from his duties, his broad shoulders heavy with the day's weight. He stepped into his home, where Doreen was preparing the evening meal, her back to him, her hands moving gracefully as she stirred the stew.

Kamuzu stood in the doorway for a moment, watching her, a quiet suspicion settling in his chest. The stories had reached him, fragmented whispers at first, like the rustle of leaves. But as the day wore on, they became louder, sharper, undeniable.

"Doreen," he said, his voice gruff, startling her. "Is there something I should know?"

Doreen turned slowly, her eyes wide, her hands faltering. She knew exactly what he was asking, and yet the words stuck in her throat. "What do you mean, Kamuzu?"

"Don't play coy with me," Kamuzu's voice was hard, the weight of leadership pressing down on him. "I hear things. Things about you and Chisomo. Care to explain?"

For a moment, there was silence. The air between them crackled, thick with the unspoken. Kamuzu's eyes, once filled with affection, now narrowed with the beginnings of doubt.

Doreen swallowed hard, the words she had kept hidden for so long threatening to spill from her lips. "Kamuzu, it's not what you think..."

But Kamuzu's face hardened, and without warn-

ing, he strode toward the door. His hands clenched into fists, his mind racing. He needed to confront Chisomo. He needed answers. The seeds of jealousy had taken root, and they had begun to sprout with a force that would not be easily stopped.

Outside, the wind had picked up, carrying the sound of voices, some angry, others fearful. The village, once a peaceful haven, was now alive with the weight of the secret that had been revealed. The baobab tree stood silent in the distance, as if it too could feel the impending storm.

In the quiet dark of the night, the village of Thondwe, nestled in its isolated corner of Malawi, had never been so alive with whispers. The truth, it seemed, would not remain hidden much longer.

I.

Thondwe was small, but its heart beat with a quiet, untamed rhythm. The village, nestled among the high hills and rolling plains of Malawi, lived and breathed with the changing seasons. Here, where the baobab trees stood as guardians to the earth, life was simple, but never still. The women of the village gathered at the foot of the great baobab every evening, as they always did, drawing water, exchanging stories, and whispering secrets that were sometimes too dangerous to utter anywhere else.

On that particular evening, the sun hung low in the sky, casting a golden hue over the parched earth. The village had already begun to quiet down, but the well, the centre of the world for the women of Thondwe, was full. A circle had formed, as always, around the towering tree. Mphatso, the sharp-tongued one, stood at the front, her voice carrying across the circle.

“Did you see that?” Mphatso asked, her voice low but sharp as a blade, her eyes darting nervously around the circle. The others leaned in, drawn by the intrigue. “It wasn’t just the sun in their eyes, I swear.”

The others shifted uncomfortably, their hands stilling as they exchanged glances, uncertain of whether to speak. Mphatso’s words had the sharpness of a secret about to be uncovered.

“I saw them too,” Martha said, her voice laced with the thrill of starting something. She was always the one who couldn’t resist stirring the pot. “Up near the old granary. It was... different. The way they were standing. Too close.”

The word “different” rippled through the women like a storm cloud gathering strength. Each of them felt it in their bones, like the first raindrops before a downpour. They had all seen it in their own way, though none had spoken of it until now. Doreen, the chief’s wife, and Chisomo, the merchant, had been seen laughing together too closely, sharing a moment that none of the women could easily forget. And now, the seed of suspicion had been planted.

“It wasn’t the sun, Mphatso,” Martha continued, her voice lowering to a near whisper. “It was something else. A look. A look only lovers share.”

At the mention of "lovers," the air thickened. The women glanced at each other, some nervous, others excited. The thought of the chief's wife betraying her husband was too delicious to resist. It was gossip for the ages.

By the time the sun had fully set and the women had dispersed, the rumour had already travelled faster than the wind, slipping through the cracks of huts, carried in the silence between children, and finding its way to the market, where it began to ferment like a ripe mango left too long on the tree.

* * * * * *

Inside Doreen's hut, she moved with the grace of someone accustomed to quietude. The aroma of simmering vegetables and roasting maize filled the air as she hummed softly to herself, unaware of the storm gathering in the hearts of her neighbours. Her hands moved expertly over the pot, stirring the stew, her mind far from the village chatter. Kamuzu, her husband, had been away all day, tending to the affairs of the village. The life of a chief was one of constant duty, of decisions and obligations. It was a life she knew well.

But today, there was a strange weight in the air,

something she couldn't quite place. The evening had come too quickly, and the shadows had begun to stretch long across the yard.

She had just finished setting the fire when she heard the familiar sound of footsteps approaching. Kamuzu had returned. She didn't need to see him to know it was him. His gait was steady, firm, the rhythm of a man who had spent years walking the earth with the weight of responsibility on his shoulders.

"Doreen," his voice was low, tinged with something she couldn't quite name, "I've returned."

She turned to face him, offering the practiced smile of a wife who knew how to play her part. "Kamuzu," she replied softly, her voice steady. "Welcome home."

But as her eyes met his, something in her gut twisted. The air between them felt different. The evening light seemed to bend, stretching unnaturally long across the yard.

Kamuzu didn't smile. He didn't even nod. He stood in the doorway, looking at her as if seeing her for the first time. His eyes were harder than usual, a shadow of doubt flickering within them.

"You've been busy, my wife," Kamuzu said, his voice

cold, stripped of the warmth she had once known. It was the tone of a man who had been betrayed, not by an enemy, but by the woman he had trusted above all others.

Doreen froze. The pot in her hands slipped slightly, but she caught it before it tipped over. “Busy with what?” she asked, her voice betraying nothing. There was a tremor in her hands, but she hoped he wouldn’t notice.

“You know well enough,” Kamuzu’s words sliced through the air. “The merchant, Chisomo. There are rumours, Doreen. Do you care to explain them to me?”

Her breath caught in her throat. Her pulse quickened. He knew.

“Rumours?” she echoed, feigning confusion, though her stomach was a roiling sea of dread. “What rumours, Kamuzu?”

The silence between them stretched long, too long. Kamuzu stepped into the hut, his towering frame casting a shadow that seemed to swallow the warmth of the fire. His eyes never left her face, his gaze unrelenting.

"Don't play coy with me, Doreen," he said, his voice low but deadly. "I hear things. Things about you and Chisomo. Care to explain?"

Her pulse raced, the room suddenly feeling too small. She had imagined this moment a thousand times in her mind, but never like this, never with the weight of her husband's suspicion pressing down on her. She wanted to lie, to deny it all, but there was no lie she could offer now that would be enough.

Doreen's voice faltered as she spoke, her words trembling. "Kamuzu… it's not what you think…"

Her words hung in the air, unfinished. She had no more words, no more defences. What could she say to him now? What excuse could she give for the growing connection between her and Chisomo? She had tried to ignore it, tried to deny the pull she felt, but the rumours had taken root too deeply.

Kamuzu's face darkened, his fists clenching at his sides. His anger, now raw and untamed, broke through the surface like a dam that had been holding back too much water.

"You think I'm a fool?" he growled. "You think I haven't seen it? The way he looks at you. The way

you look at him. Don't insult me with lies, Doreen. I know."

The room felt like it was closing in on her. The walls seemed to press in, and for the first time in years, Doreen felt small, insignificant. Her heart pounded against her ribs as she looked at Kamuzu, the man who had been her protector, her lover, her partner. Now, he was a stranger—a man who no longer trusted her.

"I… I never meant for it to happen," she whispered, her voice barely a breath. She closed her eyes, feeling the tears sting. "It's just… it's just that…"

But before she could finish, Kamuzu turned sharply, his body taut with the fury of betrayal. "Enough. I don't want to hear it anymore."

* * * * * *

As he stormed out of the hut, Doreen stood frozen, the weight of the moment sinking in. She knew, deep in her soul, that nothing would ever be the same again. The shadows of doubt had already taken root, and now, in the quiet of the night, the storm was about to break.

II.

The morning sun was unforgiving as it seared through the clouds, casting its relentless heat over the village of Thondwe. The dust hung thick in the air, clinging to everything, turning the world into a haze of earth and sky. Life carried on as usual some went to the fields, others fetched water, the children played in the dirt but there was a sense that something had shifted. The winds whispered secrets, and the trees bent under the weight of unspoken words.

Kamuzu's temper was like the storm before a fire, visible to all who saw it. And everyone saw it.

As the day stretched on, the village seemed quieter than it had been in years. There was a palpable tension that clung to the air, like the sticky humidity of an early rainstorm. No one wanted to speak to Kamuzu, his eyes cold and distant, his lips set in a tight, angry line. His usual strength seemed brittle, as if the weight of the world had cracked him from the inside.

The men who usually sought him for counsel, for leadership, now looked at him with discomfort, their steps uncertain as they passed by his hut. His anger had turned from a quiet storm into a furious thunder, and it seemed that even the earth itself was trying to avoid his wrath.

Meanwhile, the women of Thondwe carried on with their daily tasks, but their eyes were sharper than the knives they used to chop yams and cassava. The murmurs of gossip were loud in the air, but no one dared to speak of it openly. They had seen Doreen and Chisomo at the well, their smiles too warm for something as simple as friendship. The village had a way of noticing things, small things, that others would miss. And today, it was Chisomo who felt the weight of those eyes.

At the water's edge, where the women gathered, Chisomo stood awkwardly. He had always been an easy figure to overlook. His presence was quiet, calm. He knew how to listen, how to make his customers feel comfortable, how to trade a goat for a sack of maize and leave everyone satisfied. But today, it seemed as if the village had placed a magnifying glass over his every movement. Every step he took felt like it was being watched, and he couldn't help but feel like a rat cornered by a cat.

Mphatso, ever the one to stir the pot, noticed him first. Her lips curved into a knowing smile as she drew water from the well.

"Chisomo," she called, her voice too sweet for comfort. "You're really quiet today. What's wrong? Did you lose your tongue along with your manners?"

Chisomo forced a smile, shifting uncomfortably. "Not at all, Mphatso. Just thinking about... things. You know how it is."

"Oh, I know," Mphatso said, her voice laced with a playful malice. "Everyone in the village knows. You don't need to worry about the well now, the gossip is already spreading like wildfire. The chief has been in a foul mood, and I'm sure it has nothing to do with his wife and a certain merchant spending a little too much time together."

The words cut through him like the sharpest of knives, leaving a stinging wound he couldn't escape. His throat tightened, and his heart raced. He turned his eyes toward the ground, hoping the earth would swallow him whole.

"Ah, Mphatso," he said with a weak laugh, trying to brush it off. "Rumours are just that ...rumours. Don't let them trouble you."

But Mphatso was already enjoying the discomfort she had caused. She leaned closer, her voice dropping into a teasing whisper. "Oh, I'm sure. But you know, sometimes, it's the truth that finds its way to the surface, no matter how hard we try to bury it." She let the words hang in the air, heavy with implication.

Chisomo opened his mouth to say something, to defend himself, but he found that the words wouldn't come. Instead, he gave a stiff nod, and without another word, he turned and walked away, feeling the eyes of the women on his back, the weight of their judgment pressing down on him like a hundred stones.

As he walked, his mind raced. *How had it come to this?* It had been nothing, just a stolen smile, a whispered word beneath the baobab tree. Doreen had always been kind to him, always made him feel seen, something he had never known in his life. He had never meant for anything to happen between them, but sometimes, a glance was all it took, a touch in the right place at the right time. And now the village was alive with talk, its pulse quickening with every rumour that passed from mouth to mouth.

Meanwhile, Kamuzu sat beneath the shade of the great baobab, his mind a battlefield of anger and betrayal. The village had long seen him as a rock, steady,

immovable, the leader who held the balance of life in Thondwe in his hands. But now, his thoughts were tangled in dark places, his trust in the one person he had trusted the most, his wife, beginning to crumble.

He clenched his staff tightly, the wood digging into his palm, a small comfort amidst the storm within him. He could feel the eyes of the village on him, the whispers that followed him wherever he went. And he knew that soon, he would have to face the truth.

Did she betray me? he wondered. *Did she?*

The thought gnawed at him, a hunger that could not be satiated. The idea that his wife, the woman who had stood by him through thick and thin, might be part of a betrayal so deep, so personal—it was more than he could bear. The villagers had seen the way they spoke, the way Doreen had looked at Chisomo. And now, the weight of suspicion lay like a stone on Kamuzu's chest.

He couldn't stay here, not like this. He had to know. He had to confront her.

* * * * * *

Back at the well, Chisomo walked with a quick pace, trying to escape the weight of the village's eyes,

but it seemed they followed him everywhere. He couldn't breathe under the pressure. As he neared the edge of the village, he saw his friend, Peter, sitting on a rock, his back against the granary wall. Peter raised an eyebrow as Chisomo approached.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Peter said with a smirk. "The women gave you the stare, huh?"

Chisomo let out a dry laugh, shaking his head. "It's more than that. I can feel the weight of their eyes on me, Peter. It's as if I'm carrying the burden of the whole village. I never meant for any of this to happen."

Peter leaned back, cracking his knuckles. "You're in deep now, my friend. Whatever it is that's between you and Doreen, the chief's no fool. He'll find out. And when he does, you better be ready."

Chisomo felt a chill run down his spine. "I don't know what to do, Peter. I didn't plan for this. I never wanted to hurt anyone."

Peter looked at him with a mix of sympathy and grim amusement. "You've already hurt someone, my friend. And the whole village's about to feel the ripples."

* * * * * *

That afternoon, as dusk crept in and the golden light began to fade, the tension in the air grew unbearable. The villagers, sensing that the storm was nearing its peak, retreated into their huts, the whispering growing louder with each passing moment. Kamuzu, now a shadow of the man he once was, stood at the threshold of his home, watching as his wife, Doreen, went about her tasks in silence.

He had to know. He had to hear the truth from her own lips.

"Doreen," Kamuzu's voice was hoarse, raw with the emotion that he had been holding back all day. "We need to talk."

And in that moment, Doreen knew that whatever had been left unsaid between them, whatever fragile threads still bound them together, were about to unravel.

III.

The sun hung heavy in the sky, its last rays stretching across the village of Thondwe like a blanket too small to cover the growing tension. It was in the air, thick and heavy, between the trees that seemed to hold their breath, between the huts where whispers spread like wildfire. Kamuzu's shadow was a dark line against the earth as he marched toward his home, the weight of suspicion and hurt pressing on his shoulders.

His eyes burned with a fevered rage that had no outlet, no escape. The village had always looked to him for wisdom, for strength, but in this moment, all he felt was the gnawing, relentless question: *Had his wife betrayed him?*

He could hear the rhythmic thud of his sandals on the hard-packed earth, the sound sharp and unforgiving, like the ticking of a clock counting down to something inevitable. As he reached the door of his hut, his heartbeat quickened. The scent of millet and cassava filled the air, but it was no comfort. His mind was not on food or family. It was on her, Doreen.

He stepped inside without knocking, his presence as commanding as it had always been. Doreen stood in the centre of the room, her back to him, her hands frozen in midair as she prepared the evening meal. The bowl of millet trembled slightly in her grip, as if the very weight of her actions had found its way into her movements.

Kamuzu's voice broke the stillness. "You think I do not see it, Doreen?"

She turned, her face pale, eyes wide, lips trembling. There was no longer the softness of familiarity between them, only the sharp edges of suspicion and accusation.

"It is not what you think, Kamuzu," she said, her voice shaking, her words soft but desperate. "I have done nothing wrong."

Kamuzu's chest heaved with barely contained rage. His fists clenched at his sides, and his words came out like a curse, sharp and unforgiving. "You think I'm a fool?"

He had known, hadn't he? He had known the moment he saw them together, standing too close at the well, the way her laughter had lingered too long in the air. His eyes searched her face, looking for any hint of the truth, but all he found was a woman who seemed to be caught between guilt and fear.

He stepped forward, his feet moving in slow, deliberate steps. And as he did, he saw him Chisomo, standing in the doorway, his frame barely visible in the fading light. The sight of him sent a tremor of cold fear through Kamuzu, and for a split second, his anger faltered.

"I… I am sorry," Chisomo muttered, his voice barely above a whisper, as if the apology could undo what had already been set in motion.

Kamuzu's fury exploded like a storm breaking through a dam. He charged toward the young merchant, his voice a roar of outrage. "Sorry? *Sorry?* This is no time for apologies, Chisomo! You ...*you*... dare come into my house and stand before me like nothing has happened?"

Chisomo's eyes were wide, his body stiff with the weight of the accusation, and the room seemed to shrink with the pressure of it all. "I never meant for any of this to..." His words were lost in the torrent of Kamuzu's rage.

The villagers, who had been standing outside, whispering in groups, now gathered closer, drawn by the sounds of the confrontation. The air buzzed with the tension of a thousand untold stories. Men, women, children ...they all stood at a distance, watching, waiting for what would come next. They were the silent witnesses to the unravelling of a life they had always seen as solid, immovable, like the earth beneath their feet.

Doreen stood rooted to the spot, her face a mask of shock and sorrow. She wanted to speak, wanted to explain, but the words felt heavy in her throat. How could she tell Kamuzu the truth when it was the truth that had already betrayed them?

"You think you can take my wife?" Kamuzu's voice broke through her thoughts. "You think I wouldn't see through your lies? You're nothing more than a boy playing at being a man!"

Chisomo flinched, but there was something in his

eyes, a flicker of defiance, a glimpse of the man he had tried to be, that made Kamuzu pause for a brief moment.

"I never wanted this, Kamuzu," Chisomo said, his voice firm now, though the tremor in it was impossible to ignore. "I never wanted to hurt you. But the truth is already here."

The words hung in the air, thick with the weight of reality. Kamuzu's gaze shifted from Chisomo to Doreen, who stood motionless, her hands still clutching the bowl of millet. The silence between them stretched, suffocating, until it seemed as if the whole village held its breath, waiting for the storm to break.

Then, like a flood, it came.

"You think you can hide from me, Doreen?" Kamuzu's voice was dangerously low. "All these years, I've trusted you, believed in you, and this ...this is what you give me in return? Lies? Betrayal?"

Tears welled in Doreen's eyes, but she did not let them fall. "Kamuzu, please… you don't understand."

"Don't *I* understand?" Kamuzu's words were a jagged knife. "How could I understand a betrayal like this? How could I live with the truth you've hidden from me all these years?"

The villagers, sensing the inevitability of the moment, began to murmur among themselves. A ripple of doubt and uncertainty passed through the crowd. The chief, the man who had once commanded their respect, their loyalty was faltering, his foundation cracking beneath his feet. And in that crack, something dangerous was beginning to spread.

Kamuzu turned back to Chisomo, his eyes blazing. "You will leave this village. Now. And never return."

But Chisomo, standing tall despite the fear that gripped him, shook his head. "I can't leave. Not like this. Not when it's this way."

Kamuzu's fists clenched tighter, his rage spilling over like a torrent. He stepped forward, and for a moment, it seemed as if the air itself had frozen. The village waited, held its breath before, in a flash, Kamuzu's hand struck out, his palm landing harshly against Chisomo's cheek.

The slap echoed in the silence, sharp and final.

Chisomo staggered back, his hand instinctively going to his cheek, his eyes wide with a mix of shock and sorrow. "You… you struck me?"

Kamuzu stood over him, chest heaving, the red haze of fury clouding his vision. "You deserve more than that, boy. You've taken everything from me."

And then, in a moment of terrifying stillness, Kamuzu's gaze turned back to Doreen. "You… are no longer my wife."

Doreen's heart shattered at the words. The village stood still, as if the very air had been sucked out of the world. Kamuzu's declaration was not just the end of a marriage, it was the death of something far more sacred: trust.

The weight of the moment hung heavy between them, as the murmurs of the village rose into a crescendo. The betrayal was no longer just a secret—it was the pulse of the entire village, felt in every corner, every house, every whispered conversation.

And as Kamuzu stormed out, leaving Doreen and Chisomo in the wreckage of his fury, the village of Thondwe was left to reckon with the cost of betrayal and whether any of them would ever be able to piece their lives back together.

But the answer, like the broken pieces of Kamuzu's heart, was not one the village could understand just

yet. It would take more than time to heal the rift. And in the end, some wounds run too deep to ever truly mend.

END

Secrets Beneath the Baobab

Nneka Solomon

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Even the mightiest tree hides secrets within its roots.

SECRETS BENEATH THE BAOBAB

Nneka Solomon, part-time educator full-time chronicler of small-town life, spends her days navigating the unpredictable waters of academia and her evenings crafting fantastical tales where the local gossip mill becomes a cauldron of magical intrigue and the town square transforms into a bustling marketplace for enchanted wares.

Nneka Solomon